

PERSEPHONE AND DAVE

I was supposed to be meeting a colleague in Starbucks. She was called Persephone and she was my line manager. We had some work matters to discuss and Persephone said maybe we should discuss them before we went into the meeting. I'd been in the Starbucks for ten minutes when a woman came in. She was tall and sort of Mediterranean-looking, and very attractive.

"Are you Dave?" she said.

"Yes," I said, slightly puzzled. "Do I know you?"

"I'm Persephone," she said.

"No you're not," I said. "Persephone's Latvian. Besides, I know her. I see her every day."

"Oh right," she said. "You don't know."

"Don't know what?" I asked. I was looking round now, for a hidden camera or someone from the office laughing.

"When I say, I'm Persephone," she said, "I mean I'm *the* Persephone."

I looked at her. "I'm not with you at all," I said, but then it came to me and I understood what she meant.

"You're Persephone from the legend," I said. "That Persephone."

"Myth," she corrected. "Persephone of myth. Which means I can – at a moment's notice – replace any other Persephones. I mean, not for ever. Just for a while."

"Where's the other Persephone?" I asked, feeling we'd broken some kind of record for saying the word "Persephone" in a conversation.

"Swapped places," said Persephone from the myth. "It's how I travel. You know, I've only got six months on the surface."

I remembered. "Six months in the Underworld, six months on the Earth," I said.

"That's right," Persephone agreed. "God, it's nice to meet someone who knows who I am. Anyway, this place is boring. Can we go to the pub?"

I shook my head. "Can't," I said. "I've got a meeting."

Persephone shook her head. "I called the office," she said. "You've got the day off."

"OK then," I said, and off we went.

It might sound to you a bit matter of fact, all this. I'm sure you're saying, "You know what, Dave, if a creature of myth turned up on my doorstep and said let's go on the lash, I probably would think twice before accepting, personally speaking." And yeah, I see your point. I've read several Greek myths and legends, and contact between the mythical and the non-mythical generally goes badly for the latter, which in this case would be me. On the other hand, Persephone was, while mythic, not one of the bad guys. She was more of a victim, a pawn in the gods' games. And as someone destined to spend eternity between two realms, she deserved a break in my book.

So we had a day of it. We went to All Bar One, and Man In The Moon, and the nearest Spoons, and the new place in the square, and a shots bar, and then we had tapas, and we ended up in a private member's club Persephone said she belonged to. And at the end, I called us two cabs, because she was having some trouble speaking English – she may have been lapsing into an early Greek dialect

or she may just have been hammered – and we went our separate ways, me to my flat and she to the misty realms of ancient renown.

The next day the client rescheduled the meeting and I went along with the non-mythic Persephone – who seemed fine - and we sorted the contract. Life went on and I didn't give it a second thought.

Round about July, one of our clients, a different one, decided to throw a party. Well, they hired a room above the Spoons, free bar up to two hundred quid, and invited a few people who they'd done work with. Persephone from the office was invited and so was I.

And it happened again. I got there, Persephone was late and when she didn't turn up, it wasn't her, if you see what I mean.

"Oh hi," I said.

"Hi!" she said, and kissed me on the cheek. It was a warm kiss, full of zephyrs and jasmine. I didn't really know what zephyrs and jasmine were, but I knew the kiss was full of them. I suppose that's what happens when a goddess comes into your life.

"Ooh," said Persephone, "Is this Spandau Ballet?"

And she dragged me onto the dance floor.

We stayed at the party until about ten, decided it was getting dull, nipped out to the bagel place and ended up in a basement Spanish bar until about four. I walked home after making sure Persephone had got into a proper cab, and passed out in the bathroom.

After that, Persephone's visits became more and more frequent. I felt quite sorry for the non-mythic Persephone, but mythic Persephone assured me that she was fine. "She just goes and sits at an eternal banquet, has a load of nice food and wine, and when she wakes up, it was all a lovely dream," she said, "Although apparently she does have quite bad wind after."

I really enjoyed Persephone's company. She was funny, she was interesting, she knew a lot about life, she could drink for Ancient Greece and she was a creature of myth if not legend. Funnily enough, that was the bit that I found most difficult. I mean, she was a goddess of the underworld, and I was working in sales and not going to the gym as often as I might. After a big night out, Persephone could languish in tropic climes but I had to be at work.

The boss began to notice.

"What you do in your own time is no business of mine, Dave," she said. "But you're coming almost every day with red eyes, unshaven, not looking great..."

"Persephone – " I began.

"It's no good blaming your line manager," my boss said. "She's got enough on her plate without having to baby you. Here's a card. Ring them."

I took the card. ALCOCOPE it said.

"I don't have a problem with drinking," I said.

"And I'm the God of Hellfire," said my boss. "Go on. Ring them."

I rang them. ALCOCOPE turned out to be lovely people. Sitting in that room, with people who'd had problems I could not believe, changed the way I saw things.

I made connections with my life and drink that I'd never even thought of before. I saw the excuses I'd made and the bigger picture.

But when it came to the big switch-off, as they called it, I couldn't do it. It's not that booze wasn't a crutch for me – it was – or that I was drinking more than was healthy – I was – it was just I couldn't make the leap.

"I'm sorry," I told the counsellor, and I was, "I just can't give up. Not yet."

"OK," he said. They never comment or make judgments, but they do push you a little. "How about stopping for a limited period of time?"

I thought about it.

"I could do that," I said. "How long do you have in mind?"

"It's not up to me," he said, and waited.

I thought, and I thought some more.

"Six months," I said. "I think I could manage that."

I went home, threw out all the half-empty bottles of wine, the holiday liqueurs and anything else of that sort. I even hit the gym, but after twenty minutes I realised that was trying too hard. Little by little, I told myself. I went home to bed and slept better than I had done for months.

The next day I was sitting outside Café Nero when Persephone walked up to me.

"Hello," she said, "I haven't seen you for ages."

"I was about to say the same thing," I replied.

"Oh right," she said. "Sorry. One of the downsides of being married to the King of the Underworld is you have to do a lot of entertaining."

And she told me about a big festival they'd had down there, which sounded like Glastonbury, except without Coldplay and everyone was dead.

"So I was tied up," she said. "And now I'm not."

She looked at me with an eager expression and I knew exactly what she was going to say.

"Listen," Persephone said, "Shall we go and get – "

"It's half past eleven in the morning," I said.

"We could go to Pizza Express," she said, "Get an early lunch and a glass of wine. Bottle of wine maybe."

I shook my head.

"I can't," I said.

"Work?" said Persephone. "Don't worry about that."

"It's not work," I explained. And I told her.

"Dry for six months?" she said, disbelief in her voice.

"That's the plan," I said.

"Wow," she said. "But six months."

"I don't do things by halves," I said. "Although thinking about it I do."

"Well done, you," said Persephone, "I wish I had your discipline."

"It's not discipline," I said. "It's just picking a goal and sticking to it."

"That is discipline, Dave," Persephone said, "That's literally what discipline is."

"Anyway," I said. "That's why no drinking."

Persephone smiled, but in a sort of brave way. I felt bad. Maybe this was the end of our friendship? I knew lots of people who gave up drinking found it hard to maintain relationships with their mates who were still drinking. I wondered what we had in common apart from liking a drink or two.

"I've had a brilliant idea!" Persephone cried.

"Oh yeah?"

"Listen..." she said.

And that's how it started. For the six months Persephone was in Hades, I would stay sober. When she was out again, the next six months I'd spend drinking with her.

"It's a great plan!" she said. "It's almost like Fate!"

This made me a bit uneasy – Fate for Ancient Greeks is not what you'd call a benevolent force - but as a mere mortal I could not see a flaw in Persephone's plan. This way we'd continue seeing each other but also be able to get on with the more responsible side of our lives, me learning to be more responsible about drinking, her ruling the Underworld at the side of Hades, Lord of Death.

At first it was quite difficult. I'm not 18 any more and I can't do the marathon sessions any more. Perse, however, who might actually have been from Marathon, had no problems putting it away.

"You've got hollow legs," I said, as another bottle of rose joined the dead men.

"Just lucky," she said, "I never get hangovers, never have."

And she ordered a couple of flaming sambucas.

Somehow I got through the first six months. I swear I was thinking about soft drinks and nights in the way most people think about a pint of beer after work. I was sweating, I was on sparkling water before she arrived, and I learned to linger over my drinks while Perse outdrank me two to one.

"Wassammatter?" she asked me one night, squinting over the greasy rim of her wine glass.

"I can't do it," I said. "I'm sorry."

"Only thee days to go," she said, "Three. Sorry."

And to my embarrassment she put her head in her arms and burst into tears.

I never know what to say when people start crying, so I didn't say anything. After a bit, Perse sat up. Her make-up was smeared and her eyes were red.

"I want a hug," she said.

I put a hand on her shoulder, floppy like a slice of ham.

"A proper hug," she said. "I never get hugs in the Underworld. Not really a big thing amongst the dead."

I could see her then, a living, breathing, warm human being in a land of shades, lighting the darkness wherever she went only for the light to vanish as soon as she passed by.

"Come here," I said, and put my arms around her. I felt her relax at once, and we stood there for a while, breathing into each other's skin. Then she kissed me, right on the lips.

Before I could react, maybe say something like, is this the right time, we've had a couple of drinks, or kiss her back maybe even, Persephone pushed me away, gently, and smiled.

"Thank you," she said. "Now," she went on, looking round, "Where's that waiter?"

The last day of the half year came round too quickly. There were no goodbyes – there never were with Persephone. One day she was there and the next she wasn't. I tried to put her out of my mind, went to ALCOCOPE and got on with the business of sobriety. Which, given I'd spent the last six months dreaming of an alcohol-free life, turned out to be surprisingly difficult.

Alcohol is addictive, as no doubt you've heard. It's also part of most people's lives, and cuts into our souls like a harness on an animal's back. Unlike a harness, though, you can't just throw it off. It rides you hard, almost as hard as heroin or nicotine. I found myself not just thinking about booze, but also thinking about opportunities to drink. If you're a boozer, almost every moment of the day can be an occasion to have a *drink* drink. You know all the lines – "the sun's over the yardarm," "it's someone's birthday somewhere" – all that.

I found myself thinking about Perse a lot too. That kiss had been a mistake. I carried the memory of her perfume mixed in with the smell of rosé wherever I went, and sometimes just thinking of that kiss made me want a drink. Of course, you might say I associated Persephone with drinking, and you'd be right - how could I not when neither of us had ever been in a room together without a drink between us? – but there was more to it than that.

I started online dating. It didn't go well: every date I went on, there seemed to be a moment when one or both of us would want a drink. I dated a few non-drinkers, but inevitably that just meant the evening became a long conversation about giving up drinking, and I felt like a fraud in that department because, you know, I'd be back on the grape in six months time. So mostly I just sat at home, ordered pizzas, watched TV and avoided social events.

In fact, I avoided so many social events, work started to comment on it. Not nastily, at first, but I began to get a sense among my colleagues that because I was off the ale, I somehow thought myself superior to them. Eventually, after overhearing a comment from someone in the office – "Oh, Dave won't be coming out, he's going to sit at home in his ivory tower and look down on us all" – I decided it was time to act. So the next time there was an office drink – Moira in promotions was leaving to have a baby – I made it clear to all and sundry that I would be attending. I swear someone actually applauded.

The bar was crowded and noisy when I arrived (late, so as to reduce the amount of time I'd be spending around drink without having any) and it was hard to hear what people were saying. But I moved around the room, nodding and smiling, and managed to elbow myself into enough conversations to let people feel that I was one of the gang again. There were a few remarks about my not drinking, but I got a few rounds in and that seemed to do the trick: most people don't mind you not drinking so much if they're getting smashed themselves.

All in all, it was a strenuous night and I was just looking at the clock to confirm that I could slip out at a reasonable time when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned round to see a small, grey-haired woman in a long white dress, the kind

you see in the window of M and S at the height of summer. Not, I thought, that this woman looked like she shopped at Marks and Spencer.

"You're Dave," she said, in tones that brooked no contradiction.

I was about to ask her who she was, when something about her – the eyes, maybe – gave it away.

"You're Persephone's mother, aren't you?" I said. "Demeter."

Demeter gave me an assessing look.

"I'm hungry," she said. "Is there a Garfunkel's near here?"

We sat in the Garfunkel's, in a booth near the back. I had a coke and Demeter had a plate piled high with salad.

"Just salad?" I asked.

"I'm vegetarian," she said, forking great wads of lettuce into her mouth.

I waited until she had finished. To be honest, it wasn't a long wait. Demeter was clearly very hungry, and her plate was soon entirely empty.

"That's better," she said. "Now I can think straight."

She fixed me with the assessing look again. It wasn't a nice look: it was the kind of look my own mother used to give me whenever I said something like, "But I am going to revise for this exam" or "I'll be home early, I promise."

"So you're Dave," she said. She sounded both astonished and exasperated.

"I believe we've established that," I replied.

"Don't get clever with me," Demeter said. "I could turn you into a locust and eat you, just like that."

"You're a vegetarian," I said.

"I can make an exception," she said. She looked me square in the eye.

"Families are strange, aren't they? You can't help loving them, but the things they do to you... they can be terrible."

"My dad told me I was getting a bike when I was 12," I said, mostly for something to say. "But when the time came – he'd been gone six months. Never saw him again. Never got the bike, either."

Demeter snorted. It wasn't a sympathetic snort.

"When I was a baby, my father ate me," she said. "Vomited me up again later, but still. It's not something you forget."

"No," I said, "I should think not."

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. I suddenly felt a bit *locusty*.

"Listen," said Demeter. "I don't have much time. Unlike my daughter, I can't just come and go as I please."

"Not many Demeters round here either, I suppose," I said.

"London?" said Demeter, "You'd be surprised. I've just traded places with a nursery school teacher from Hampstead."

She took my coke and drank what was left.

"Nice," she said. "Makes a change from the waters of Lethe."

She looked around.

"Right, Dave," said Demeter Amphiktuonis Kalligeneia, the Great Mother, the Fruit-Bearer, the Granter of Gifts, "We need to have a little chat."

Little nugget of interest to mythologists: when a goddess says, "we need to talk", she means that she needs to talk. And Demeter could talk for Ancient Greece. I don't mean that as a knock to women, or mothers – I nearly said "mothers-in-

law” which tells you a bit how my mind was running. She talked and she talked. At one point I looked at my watch because I was sure it was very late and Garfunkel’s had to be closing up. But no: the diners and the staff were moving at glacial speed. Demeter had slowed time to a snail’s crawl.

Much of what she told me I knew: from Wikipedia, from books, and from *Xena: Warrior Princess*, which had been my favourite show as a kid. How Hades saw Persephone out picking flowers, fell in love with her – “Love!” Demeter snorted, “He doesn’t know the meaning of the word” and took her to the Underworld in his chariot. How Demeter, grieving, inconsolable – “I mean, I had other children, but one was a nymph and the other was a talking horse,” Demeter confessed, “It’s not the same” - let the Earth become barren, bringing famine to the world of men, until Zeus himself was forced to intervene (“which he hates, unless sex is involved”). And how Hades was made to return Persephone to this world but, because she’d eaten a pomegranate seed in the Underworld, Persephone could only spend six months on Earth and the remaining six with Hades.

“Which is why - ” Demeter began.

“I know this,” I said, “Which is why we have winter.”

Demeter gave me an old-fashioned look.

“Which is why I hate pomegranates, I was going to say,” she said.

We went to a different pub. I had a bottle of low-alcohol stout and Demeter had a large gin and tonic.

“So now you see,” she said.

“See what?” I replied.

“That you are upsetting the balance of heaven and earth,” she said, snapping her fingers. To my astonishment, the barman immediately brought her another drink.

“I’m not doing anything,” I said. “I didn’t even ask to meet her. I mean, I like her, you know, but - ”

I stopped. I had just realised that it was a bit more than “like” with me and Perse.

“Exactly,” said Demeter. “Do you know how hard it is to maintain the equilibrium between the worlds of men and gods?”

“I expect you’ve had a lot of practice,” I said.

“Very hard,” said Demeter, ignoring me. “And now you come along, with your low-alcohol beer and your shirt and your tie, and you seduce my daughter.”

“I haven’t seduced her!” I almost shouted. “I’ve never even kissed her.”

“Good,” said Demeter. “Because if you had - ”

“Wait,” I said. “She kissed me. When she was a bit pissed.”

Demeter froze.

“She kissed you?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. “It was just a sloppy drunk thing. I’m sure she didn’t mean anything by it.”

But again, I realised: she had meant it. And I was glad that she meant it.

“Oh *Hades*,” said Demeter, with feeling.

“What about him?” I said.

“It’s just an expression,” said Demeter. “It means we’re done for.”

“Who is?” I asked.

Demeter waved airily around the room.

"Everyone," she said. "You, me. Humanity. The Gods. We're done for."

The problem was, Demeter told me over about twenty gin and tonics, that it had taken a great deal of negotiation and diplomacy between Mount Olympus and the Underworld to resolve the situation vis-à-vis Persephone and Hades.

"At one point Hades was saying she could be on Earth Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and he would have her the rest of the week," Demeter said, contemptuously, "We only got him off that hobby horse when Zeus threatened to make every human immortal so there'd be no more dead for him to rule."

"Why didn't you just tell him to give her back?" I asked. "I mean, he had literally stolen Persephone."

"Because that's what gods do," said Demeter. "If it wasn't for kidnapping, and murder, and incest, there wouldn't be any gods."

I decided to let that one go.

"I still don't see how I'm the problem," I said. "I'm a mere mortal, after all."

Demeter raised an eyebrow. It was as black as starless night.

"Are you?" she said.

And before I could stop her, she smashed her tonic bottle on the table and thrust its jagged neck into my throat.

I grabbed at my neck.

"What did you -"

I stopped. I couldn't feel any blood. There was no wound, either.

"You missed," I said.

"I'm the Great Mother," said Demeter, "I don't miss. I stabbed you in the throat, and nothing happened."

"What? Why?"

"Because my daughter kissed you," Demeter said. "Because she gave you part of her glamour."

"Like models glamour?" I asked, stupidly.

"No," said Demeter. "Like the glamour of divinities. Like immortal glamour."

I sat back and laughed.

"I'm not immortal," I said. "I'd know."

I looked at her.

"Wouldn't I?"

Demeter shrugged.

"You're probably not immortal as such," she said. "Maybe just indestructible. Or you'll live for centuries. It's going to wear off, anyway, unless she kisses you again. Which is *not* going to happen."

"Wow," I said. "I'm a semi-immortal. Like Hercules or someone."

"Hercules is as stupid as a stone," said Demeter. "So in that respect, yes, peas in a pod."

She snapped her fingers. The pub had closed an hour before, but the barman still brought more drinks over.

"I can't even kill you now," said Demeter, abstractedly.

"I'm sorry, I'm sure," I said.

"It took centuries to fix what Hades did to my daughter," said Demeter.
"And even then we were only able to resolve it because it was - "

She searched for the right words.

"God on god," she finished. "But you? You're not even a hero! You work in sales!"

"Bought ledgers," I said, hurt.

"Thousands of years of harmony between man and gods, under threat," said Demeter.

"I didn't ask her to kiss me," I said.

"Please shut up," Demeter said. "Given time, I'm sure I could find a way to kill you."

I stood up. In the corner, I could see the surly barman starting to nod off on a barstool.

"I want you to go now," I said.

She laughed, a short, contemptuous bark.

"I mean it," I said. "I may not be a god or a hero, but I'm not taking this from you. I've done nothing wrong, and nor has Persephone, so leave us alone."

Demeter looked at me with murder in her eyes, and I swear that if she could have harmed me, she would have then. But she couldn't, which was the gamble I'd taken, and she knew it.

She got up, swallowed the last dregs of gin in her glass, and walked out, slamming the door behind her.

"Time, gentlemen, please," the barman mumbled in his sleep.

The next day I went to work as usual. I didn't really have any choice. I don't get much time off as it is, and you can't really say, sorry folks, I'm not coming in to the office today because I've upset the balance of the heavens. And it wasn't a bad day, to be honest. Sometimes the boring mundane nature of work can put all your fears to one side for a while.

That said, I was still surprised when Alice from the second floor put her head round the door and said, "Dave, Persephone's here to see you." Alice must have wondered if I'd lost my mind because I all but knocked her to the ground in my rush to get to the door.

Of course, it wasn't her. It was the other Persephone. I tried to conceal my disappointment, and said, "Persephone! What can I do for you this morning?"

Which was when she burst into the broadest smile I've ever seen and said, "I just wanted to thank you!"

We went downstairs for coffee and a panini (she was on an early lunch) and found a quiet corner where there were no would-be entrepreneurs hogging the armchairs and the wifi.

"Thank me?" I asked.

Persephone – the other Persephone – nodded. She looked nothing like "my" Persephone, but she had a smile the equal of any in heaven or earth. Which, I have to say, wasn't something I'd noticed about her before.

"He's told me everything," said the other Persephone. "I'm so grateful!"

"Who has?" I said. Then it came to me.

"I thought you were in a trance," I said. "When you went – Down There."

"I was," she said. "At least at first. I just dreamt that I was at these amazing parties, with amazing people who just happened to be, you know, dead. But after a while, it got ridiculous. I mean, nobody has dreams like that, not all the time, even recurring ones. So the next time I woke up in my dream, I grabbed Hade and I said – "

"Hade?" I said, wondering if I'd misheard.

"Hade," she said, impatiently, "That's what I call him. He calls me Persy and I call him Hade. Anyway I grabbed him and said, now listen, mate, I don't care if your eyes are flaming coals of mystery and your face contains hidden depths of beauty, I want to know what's going on here."

"And he told you?" I asked. "Hade?"

"Hade told me," said Other Persephone – Persy. "He told me the whole thing. How I'd been made to swap places with *her* while she went on these massive benders with you. And how – "

Persy smiled. It was almost a simper.

"And how he was in love with me."

I sat back in my chair.

"The Lord of the Underworld is in love with you?"

It must not have come out right, because Persy glowered at me.

"Why not?" she said. "I'm young, I'm attractive, I'm organized – which is more than Miss Hello Clouds Hello Sky is – and we're in love."

"I'm sorry," I said. "Really. And I'm pleased for you both, really."

"Good," she said. "Because we need a favour."

"A favour?" I said.

"Seeing as this is all your fault, anyway," said Persy.

Six months later, I was dead.

I stood at the gates of the Underworld. Inside, I could hear a three-headed dog barking.

I don't know how long I was stood there. It felt like an eternity, but it was probably only half an hour. I was just looking at my watch for the tenth time, when there she was.

Persephone. The most beautiful woman I have ever seen, and ever will see. She had a bit of a frown on, which was understandable.

"Dave?" she said. "What are you doing here? Are you - "

"Hi Persephone," I said. And from behind my back I produced a dozen red roses.

"Oh!" said Persephone. She always was a sucker for flowers. "They're beautiful."

A couple of petals dropped to the stone floor.

"We'd better get back before they wilt," I said.

"Back?" said Persephone.

I was only dead for a bit, you understand. There was no way they were going to let anyone *living* go down to the Underworld. And there was no way

they were going to let Persephone just nip upstairs again, not after all the trouble she'd caused in the first place.

Demeter was furious at first. But after I'd gone all out to appease her – taking an EasyJet flight to Greece, finding one of her old shrines and buying half a goat from a local butcher as a sacrifice, which did not please the tour guide – she was a bit mollified. And when I pointed out she'd be getting more time with her daughter, she started to sit up and take notice. Eventually, she agreed to take my proposal back to Mount Olympus, run it up a flagpole and see if anyone saluted.

And it went OK. The gods weren't best pleased at first, but once they realised that not only were heaven and earth once more aligned and all that but also Hades would be happier – thereby avoiding any issues with the dead, who can cut up a bit rough when they want to – then it was a done deal.

So here I was, standing outside the gates of the Underworld, temporarily dead but very much avoiding pomegranate seeds or anything like that, just waiting for Persephone so I could take her back to Earth. If that's what she wanted, of course, which fortunately she did.

It all turned out fine. Hade and Persy are having the time of their lives, if that's the right word, down there in the Underworld. Persephone's off the booze now, by and large, and we both find we can take a drink in moderation from time to time. We generally need one after Persephone's mum has been to visit, which is not to knock mothers-in-law, but she does keep going on about kids.

By and large, though, it's an easy life. Six months a year Persephone and I spend in my world, and the other six – Ibiza, quite often, or Marbella. We might give the Seychelles a go.

After all, we've got plenty of time.